

DR. THE HONOURABLE KEITH ROWLEY, PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO ADDRESS AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE TWELFTH CONFERENCE OF DEFENSE MINISTERS OF THE AMERICAS

The Honourable, Mr Justice Ivor Archie, Chief Justice of Trinidad and Tobago,
Senator the Honourable Christine Kangaloo, President of the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago
Major General (ret) the Honourable Edmund Dillon, M.P. Minister of National Security
Members of the Cabinet of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago,
Distinguished Ministers of Defence and Ministers of Security of the Americas,
Your Excellencies, the Heads of Diplomatic Missions,
Heads of International Organisations,
Senior Representatives of Government,
Other distinguished delegates and Observers
Representatives of the Media
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning to you all.

It is indeed a pleasure for me to extend greetings and a warm welcome to you to Trinidad and Tobago and to the Twelfth Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas (CDMA). Your presence here today, as Ministers and senior military and civilian officials of the countries of the Americas region, is testament to the fraternal bonds which have traditionally existed among our countries and indeed underscores our shared commitment to the peace and prosperity of the Hemisphere.

It is this very commitment that enables the convening of this forum for the primary purpose of holding in-depth discussions on the defence and security challenges within the Hemisphere, bearing in mind that the challenges we face today are far more complex than the national ones we faced yesterday.

Such commitment was also demonstrated in April of 2009 when Trinidad and Tobago received the Heads of State and Government of the countries represented here today, for the Fifth Summit of the Americas. On that occasion, the first Summit to be held in the Caribbean, the leaders of the Americas held discussions on the theme “Securing Our Citizens’ Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability”, a theme which several years later resonates with the thematic focus of the XII CDMA.

Interestingly enough, this is also the first time that the CDMA is being held in a Caribbean State. The Caribbean States that are members of the CDMA and some of our Central American colleagues, cannot boast of large standing armies, navies or air forces. Indeed many of our countries do not have Ministries dedicated only to defence matters or large defence institutions. However, we affirm and adhere to the principles that were established in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1995 at the very first Conference of Defence Ministers.

We believe:

- that the preservation of democracy is the basis for ensuring our mutual security;
- that military and security forces play a critical role in supporting and defending the legitimate interests of our states.

We believe also, that our Armed Forces must be subordinate to democratically controlled authority, and act within the bounds of our national Constitutions, with full respect for human rights. These Williamsburg principles also speak to transparency in defence matters through exchanges of information and greater civilian-military dialogue; the importance of negotiating and resolving disputes; and the importance of defence cooperation.

Over the past 21 years, the work of this forum has been driven by that Williamsburg spirit. With keen interest, your predecessors have shared experiences on issues such as confidence-building measures, regional cooperation for defence, the role of the armed forces in democracy; and once more, most relevant today, the matter of strengthening partnerships in support of humanitarian assistance and aid in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Issues on the table at the time of that first CDMA included, trafficking in drugs and arms, crime and terrorism. While these issues remain valid today, the passage of time has indeed drawn us, individually and collectively, into new theatres of war which demand responses to a plethora of unprecedented and insidious threats. This is a reflection of the increasingly volatile globalised world in which we live.

The need to consider options for an enhanced security and defence posture propels us therefore to, not only address traditional threats, but to develop responses to the new and emerging threats while taking account of the changing national, regional and international environment.

Ladies and gentlemen, this situation is not unique to the Hemisphere. The scourges of our time do not respect size or geography. It is noteworthy that in his recent address to the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon expressed his “deep concern” for the state of global affairs. A few of his observations, pertinent to our purpose here today, include, and I quote:

“Gulfs of mistrust divide citizens from their leaders. Extremists push people into camps of “us” and “them”. The Earth assails us with rising seas, record heat and extreme storms. And danger defines the days of many.

Armed conflicts have grown more protracted and complex; and

Human rights are the pillars of society -- and the antidotes to violent extremism and civic despair.”

At a time when the global community is working towards the attainment of seventeen sustainable development goals, inclusive of one related to security, the CDMA presents a much needed forum for considering more closely, the contribution which could be made by Ministries of Defence and their respective agencies, over and above their traditional defence roles.

As we reflect on Goal 16 of the 2030 Transformative Sustainable Development Agenda of the United Nations, which points to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, we cannot help but acknowledge that notwithstanding significant development gains, the global landscape continues to be plagued by socio-economic ills inclusive of poverty, inequality, unemployment, and environmental degradation. The convergence of these and other challenges such as violent extremism, sustained conflict, use of information and communication technology for nefarious purposes, and erratic weather patterns, result in a range of unwelcome consequences for us all, large and small.

At the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Trinidad and Tobago made reference to the recognition of the 2030 Agenda that “sustainable development can only be realised in a peaceful, secure and stable environment bereft of war and conflict.” In this regard, the threats of transnational organised crime, violent extremism, terrorism, money-laundering, trafficking in persons, cybercrime and illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons have the potential to impact regional and international security and indeed, to undermine sustainable development efforts, particularly for small island developing states such as those of the Caribbean.

The heightened level of volatility, particularly in the area of security, which is now evident across the globe has created an undeniable imperative for closer collaboration and co-operation that supersedes that which has historically been driven by bonds of friendship. Indeed, even as we seek to secure our borders, preserve both democracy and sovereignty, defend our interests and promote peace and security for our citizens, the existence of supra-national and virtual web-based structures propel us to reconfigure and re-tool our defence mechanisms and cooperation arrangements for this new and unfolding reality.

As events across the globe over the last year have unequivocally demonstrated, such volatility has visited the developed, the developing, the land-locked and on the coastal and island states. The current situation requires of us new and different perspectives, a paradigm shift. It is not enough, for example, for us to say that we have invested in the acquisition of military assets, that we have amassed armaments and are at the cutting edge of defence technology. It is not enough to say that we have strengthened our armed forces. It is not enough to say that we meet biennially to exchange experiences and ideas. The wave of new threats which threaten this era demands nothing less than our undivided attention to the institutionalization of robust mechanisms for information sharing, continuous cooperation and collaboration- not next year, not next month, but now.

The overarching theme of the Conference, “Strengthening Defence and Security Cooperation in the Hemisphere in an Increasingly Volatile Global Environment”, was proposed by

Trinidad and Tobago in our bid to emphasise the need for the Ministers of Defence of the Americas to explore new avenues for engagement and cooperation in security and defence matters.

There can be little argument that the fundamental pre-requisites for any such discussion include flexibility, institutional and infrastructural agility, an appreciation of the contextual arena in which we all operate, and an openness to understanding the uniqueness of others. Indeed, Article 2 of the CDMA Regulations outline the purpose of this forum in addressing matters of mutual interest, and indicates that the expected output would be increased cooperation and integration.

The Regulations also reflect a recognition that the Member States of the CDMA are not homogenous in nature. Yet the security and defence challenges of the Hemisphere, as indeed those of the wider global community, transcend geographical, language, political, social and cultural barriers; and therefore calls for mechanisms of enhanced cooperation and collaboration.

Within many of the sub-regions of the Hemisphere there are examples of such mechanisms. For CARICOM, security cooperation is a pillar of our integration movement and as Lead

Head for Crime and Security in the region, Trinidad and Tobago has been responsible for directing regional policy to enhance the security of our citizens against traditional as well as new and emerging threats. For small island developing states such as ours, the maintenance of international peace and security is of utmost importance and we recognise that defence and security are inextricably linked to the collective welfare and prosperity of our people and the attainment of sustainable development goals.

Notwithstanding the existence of bilateral and sub-regional agreements and treaties in the areas of defence and security, there is no overarching cooperation policy for the Americas. In fact, the Americas is the only region in the world that does not have a hemispheric defence and security cooperation policy. The European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) can boast of the existence and effective implementation of such cooperation policies in the area of defence and security.

I am confident that the discussions here in Port of Spain will lay the foundation for the development of a hemispheric framework to improve cooperation and coordination among the defence and security authorities in the hemisphere. Moreover, we remain optimistic that, among other things, the dialogue on the thematic axis “Hemispheric Security and Defence Cooperation Policy: Beginning with Strengthened Humanitarian Emergency Assistance” would eventually lead to the adoption of a comprehensive policy framework to guide civil to military and military to military cooperation, beginning first in the area of Disaster Response and Humanitarian Emergency Assistance.

The Caribbean region has experienced significant misfortune in the form of natural disasters with the most recent being Hurricane Erika that swept Dominica in August 2015 and led to extensive destruction of homes and much of the island's tourism infrastructure. Moreover, we can never forget the 7.0 earthquake that rocked Haiti in 2010 and now as I speak the havoc of Matthew is upon us. That tragic event required humanitarian emergency assistance from the region and the wider international community. Natural disasters in Latin America such as 8.8 magnitude earthquake in Chile in 2010; other earthquakes in countries such as Ecuador and floods and fires in the United States and Canada, respectively, are also stark reminders of the Hemisphere-wide vulnerability to natural disasters.

It is our hope therefore that this Conference will provide avenues for improving preparedness and cooperation to mitigate the hardship which could ensue in the immediate aftermath of natural disasters.

In Trinidad and Tobago, for example, the Civil Aviation Authority has sought to enhance Civil-Military Coordination for Aeronautical Search and Rescue by seeking to harmonize and improve Search and Rescue operations within Trinidad and Tobago by hosting operational meetings with key National Security stakeholders including the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard (TTCG); the Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard (TTAG); the National Operations Centre (NOC) and the Office of Disaster Preparedness Management (ODPM). We continue to undertake our responsibility in this country, for aeronautical and maritime search and rescue for a vast area in our Hemisphere. Our facilities are world class and we take this responsibility seriously. While we are guided by the International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (IAMSAR) Manual, published as a guide to States, and we co-operate bilaterally and regionally, there can be little argument that a hemispheric policy in the area of Disaster Response and Humanitarian Emergency Assistance would further enhance our effectiveness and impact.

As many of you may be aware, the Government which I lead assumed office in September 2015, at a time when the mainstay of our economy took a severe blow from the decline in energy prices. Even as we are adjusting our economic strategies, in light of our financial constraints and notwithstanding the need to rationalise our resources, the hosting of this meeting remained of paramount importance.

The XII CDMA is the only international conference that we are hosting this year, during this period of fiscal restraint. This is because we have recognised the relevance of this forum for all participating States, as well as the fact that significant preparatory work for the actual Conference had already been completed. At this time, I would wish to acknowledge the financial support provided by many of our corporate citizens in partnering with the Government in the hosting of this event. We all recognise the value of the CDMA and the impact of the decisions taken at this forum on the lives and livelihoods of the peoples of the Americas, and indeed on their peace and security. Such a recognition fuels our commitment to the multilateral process.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would wish to suggest a two-pronged approach be adopted for consideration during the course of your discussions and deliberations over the next two days. In this regard, the fundamental differences in our realities, including, but not limited to, physical size; border character and integrity; stages of development; defence administration; and physical and human resources, must be juxtaposed against the indisputable fact that as a consequence of technology, increased mobility, climate change and higher levels of global integration, all threats become common threats. Those who have ill-intent are relentless in their pursuits. We, the representatives of the states of the Hemisphere must therefore be more committed, more vigilant and even more disposed to strengthened collaboration and co-operation.

We have been provided with the CDMA platform to shape our Hemispheric security and defence strategies and I wish to encourage all representatives to seize the opportunity of the next two days to consider:

- avenues for enhanced cooperation between military and civilian entities, taking cognisance of the evolving role of the military in securing and defending states;
- the special security concerns of small island and other developing states in the Hemisphere;
- strengthened collaboration with hemispheric partners to address new and emerging transnational threats;
- commencement of the dialogue towards the development of a ‘Hemispheric Security and Defence Cooperation Policy’ with an initial focus on Humanitarian Emergency Assistance;
- expanded collaboration with International Agencies; and
- action-oriented recommendations in the Declaration to be adopted at the conclusion of the conference.

In closing, I leave with you the motto of Trinidad and Tobago, which was established by the late Dr Eric Williams, first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago on the occasion of our independence: “Together we aspire, together we achieve”.

This motto is founded upon the principles of cooperation and collaboration. Collective effort would result in collective achievement. The embodiment of this motto is also reflected in the biblical narrative of the oneness of mind that pervaded the builders of the tower of Babel.

The logo of the XII CDMA positions the State of Trinidad and Tobago at the centre, extending outwards through the Caribbean and to continental America. It is my hope therefore that the demonstration of our commitment, warmth and hospitality, has set the stage for constructive dialogue that embraces the entire Hemisphere to the extent that our national motto defines and governs our collective efforts to enhancing defence and security in the interest of the people of the Americas.

I thank you.